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DEFENDANT Approx. $84 Million on Deposit...INO Treasury of the Ministry of Finance...	TYPE OF PROCESS Publication

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Edited by the International Herald Tribune
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International Herald Tribune
Monday, June 18, 2007

ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

Asia is still haunted by risks to currency

By Matthew Benjamin and Shamim Adam

WASHINGTON: The next Asian contagion may be only a bad currency trade away.

Ten years after the collapse of overvalued Asian currencies in 1997, the remedies their governments embraced to prevent a recurrence may have traded one set of risks for another. Their "never again" determination has led them to new extremes: artificially low currencies, a record $3.4 trillion in reserves and export-reliant economies.

"The currency and financial policies in Asia today risk planting the seeds of a new and different financial crisis," said Nouriel Roubini, chairman of Roubini Global Economics and a professor at the Stern School of Business at New York University. "It's a dangerous system, both for these countries and for the global economy."

In emerging markets, central banks and governments are grappling with risks like inflation, asset bubbles and vulnerability to a U.S. slowdown. For investors, meanwhile, "risk has been underpriced," Roubini said, with the result that "this can have negative effects on bonds, currencies and equity markets."

Thailand began the Asian crisis in July 1997 when it devalued the baht in an effort to shore up its faltering economy, abandoning a costly policy of pegging the currency to the U.S. dollar.

That set off a chain reaction that turned the Asian investment and real estate boom into a bust, leading to a stampede by foreign investors to pull money out. The crisis worsened as foreign exchange reserves proved insufficient to prevent regional currencies from plummeting.

Emerging markets have made progress toward avoiding a repeat. Central banks are more independent, government debt has declined, financial systems are stronger and current-account balances are generally in surplus.

"A lot of lessons have been learned," said the financier George Soros, whom the then-prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, blamed for worsening the 1997 crisis through currency speculation. Still, some governments have learned "the wrong lesson," Soros told reporters June 5 in São Paulo, citing price controls in Argentina and "very substantial reserves" in Brazil.

Anwar Ibrahim, the finance minister of Malaysia during the crisis, said that "fundamental flaws have not been corrected." Currencies are still inflexible, showing that "we are still in a state of denial," he said.

As investors fled Asia after the 1997 devaluation in Thailand, they set off a plunge in other currencies that had previously been propped up with fixed exchange rate regimes. The Indonesian rupiah fell 57 percent against the U.S. dollar, causing companies to buckle under $80 billion in foreign debt and leading to riots in Jakarta.

The Thai baht, the South Korean won and the Malaysian ringgit also plunged. Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Taiwan and the Philippines all suffered and the crisis spread to Latin America and Russia.

China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, India, Russia and Argentina still manage their currencies, generally maintaining artificially low levels. South Korea and Indonesia allow more flexibility.

"They're all managed floats," said Stephen Jen, global head of currency research for Morgan Stanley. "For the most part, they're more managed than float."

Cheap currencies have led to excessive monetary and credit growth worldwide, creating asset bubbles in South Korea and China and inflating consumer prices in India, Russia and Argentina.

Policy makers in Asia are adding restrictions on lending and increasing taxes on share trades to combat bubbles. Meanwhile, the buildup of foreign-exchange reserves, part of a prescription by the International Monetary Fund for avoiding a repeat of the 1997 crisis, has exceeded all expectations.

"Some lessons were overlearned," said Ted Truman, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington. He and other economists say the massive reserves contribute to excess liquidity.

There are opportunity costs to holding excess reserves that might otherwise be invested in infrastructure improvements, health care or higher-yielding assets, economists said.

Also, by focusing on exchange rates, governments in emerging economies may overlook other risks, said Stephen Roach, chief global economist at Morgan Stanley, who becomes the company's Asia chairman this month.

"The next crisis is never the same as the last," he said. "By fixating on the problems that foreshadowed the last crisis, the risk is Asia gets blindsided by another problem."

Bloomberg News

Shamim Adam reported from Kuala Lumpur.

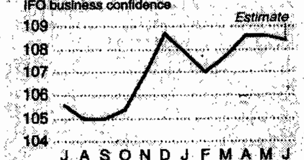
Global economic indicators

The top economic releases expected the week of June 18, including the median forecast of analysts surveyed by Bloomberg and the last reported figure.

Day	Country	Indicator	Median forecast	Prior period
Mon.	United States	NAHB housing market index	30	30
Tues.	Germany	ZEW investor confidence	29	24
Tues.	Italy	Unemployment rate	6.4%	6.5%
Tues.	Canada	Consumer price index, year-on-year	2.2%	2.2%
Tues.	United States	Housing starts	1.47 million	1.53 million
Wed.	Japan	Merchandise trade balance	¥470,4 billion	¥922.8 billion
Wed.	Britain	Public sector net cash requirement	£7 billion	-£3.8 billion
Wed.	Sweden	Riksbank interest rate	3.50%	3.25%
Thurs.	France	Consumer spending, month-on-month	0.5%	-0.3%
Thurs.	Italy	Consumer confidence	109.8	109.5
Thurs.	Euro zone	Manufacturing PMI	54.9	55.0
Thurs.	Euro zone	Services PMI	57.3	57.3
Thurs.	United States	Philadelphia Fed manufacturing index	7.0	4.2
Fri.	Germany	IFO business confidence	108.4	108.6
Fri.	Euro zone	Industrial orders, month-on-month	-0.8%	2.7%

United States
Housing starts in millions

Germany
IFO business confidence



Global economy watch

A snapshot of key figures for the world's largest economies.

Country	Annual GDP in billions	GDP growth	Surplus/ deficit, percent of GDP	Inflation	Jobless rate
Brazil	$966.83	4.3%	2.5%	3.2%	10.1%
Britain	2,357.58	2.9	-3.6	2.5	2.7
Canada	1,273.14	2.3	1.7	2.2	6.1
China	2,554.20	11.1	-2.4	3.4	4.1
Euro zone	10,445.54	3.0	-2.6	1.9	7.1
France	2,227.33	2.0	-2.9	1.1	8.2
Germany	2,890.09	3.6	-3.3	1.9	9.2
India	854.48	9.1	-3.6	6.7	7.3
Italy	1,841.04	2.3	-4.1	1.5	6.5
Japan	4,463.59	2.6	-5.8	0.0	3.8
Mexico	811.28	2.6	-1.2	4.0	3.6
Russia	975.34	7.9	9.9	7.6	7.0
South Korea	877.19	4.0	1.9	2.3	3.4
United States	13,262.07	1.9	-1.5	2.7	4.5

Source: Bloomberg, IMF, local government agencies

INVESTING

Chet Currier

Bonds as barometer: It ain't necessarily so

LOS ANGELES

In the daily dance of the financial markets, it is plain to see who is leading and who is following right now.

When bond yields jump, stock prices slump. As the yield on 10-year U.S. Treasury notes has climbed past 5 percent to highs not seen since 2002, concern has spread that rising interest rates might disrupt the stock-market advance dating back to that same year.

There are several plausible reasons why higher rates look like bad news for stocks. But all that is theory. In practice, does a bad year for bonds automatically mean trouble for stocks as well?

The short answer is no. In the past 15 years, according to my Bloomberg, the yield on the 10-year Treasury has risen by more than 10 percent four times. In three of those four years, the Standard & Poor's 500-stock index posted gains averaging better than 20 percent.

A textbook case came in 1999, when the yield on the 10-year note climbed 39 percent, to 6.4 percent from 4.6 percent. The S&P 500 ran up a 20 percent gain anyway as stocks neared the peak of a great bull market.

See also 2003, which gave us an 11 percent rise in the Treasury yield and a 26 percent gain in stocks. Or 1996, when the Treasury yield increased 15 percent and stocks were up 20 percent.

The lone exception to this pattern was 1994, when the yield on the 10-year note jumped 34 percent, to 7.8 percent from 5.8 percent. That time the S&P 500 declined 1.5 percent.

Suppose you had some way of knowing each year in advance whether interest rates were going to rise or fall. Applying lessons well learned in the 1970s and '80s, you pulled your money out of stocks in '94, '96, '99 and '03.

You would have missed out on market gains, not counting dividends, averaging 16 percent per year. That is a high price to pay in any money management plan, short term or long.

Now, none of this is to say that the worries raised by the recent rise in interest rates are frivolous. Increased costs of credit really could put a dent in corporate earnings growth.

They could also chill enthusiasm for company takeovers by private-equity investors and buybacks by companies of big chunks of their own shares. These deals are typically financed with borrowed money.

A sustained rise in interest rates might serve to dry up the worldwide liquidity boom that has kept so many markets hopping in recent years, from commodities to junk bonds. To keep yourself awake some night, just imagine how a big move up in rates might play out in the derivatives market, where so many investors own a piece of other people's credit risk.

Not the sort of stuff to be taken lightly. Even so, the bullish argument for stocks — to which I still stubbornly subscribe — holds that this tale doesn't have to come to any such bad end.

With its rise from 4.4 percent in December to about 5.3 percent recently, the yield on the 10-year note is still pretty low in absolute terms. Over the last 20 years, it has averaged about 6.2 percent.

It spent much of the past few years at what amounted to artificially low levels. With so much liquidity sloshing around the world, investors large and small were willing to buy bonds at yields lower than seemed to be justified by economic circumstances.

Now, for whatever reason, this anomaly looks to be "normalizing" — although, as Timothy Geithner, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, observed this week, "It's hard to know what normal is in a world that's changed so much."

The markets have some recent experience with credit normalization: the raising of the Federal Reserve's target interest rate on overnight bank loans from an abnormal 1 percent at mid-2004 to a presumably much more normal 5.25 percent at mid-2006 (and ever since). From mid-2004 through mid-2006, the S&P 500 climbed 11 percent a year, or 15 percent if you include dividends.

On that evidence, stocks ought to handle a normalization in longer-term interest rates with aplomb. The crucial question is how far the rise in rates goes.

How will we know when bond rates threaten to become something more ominous? The stock market may be among the first to tell us.

In the recent era of abnormally low rates, stock volatility has also been unusually low. If those days are over, it stands to reason that market volatility may be ready to normalize too.

Bloomberg News

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Rev. 11/94
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Dated: New York, New York
May, 2007
MICHAEL J. GARCIA
U.S. Attorney/SDNY
JOSEPH R. GUCCIONE
U.S. Marshal/SDNY